

UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
SOUTHERN DISTRICT OF OHIO
WESTERN DIVISION

KRYSTEN WAYE,

Case No. 1:18-cv-201

Plaintiff,

Dlott, J.
Bowman, M.J.

v.

COMMISSIONER OF SOCIAL SECURITY,

Defendant.

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Plaintiff Krysten Wade filed this Social Security appeal in order to challenge the Defendant's finding that she is not disabled. See 42 U.S.C. §405(g). Proceeding through counsel, Plaintiff presents three claims of error, all of which the Defendant disputes. For the reasons explained below, I conclude that this case should be REMANDED because the finding of non-disability is not supported by substantial evidence in the administrative record.

I. Summary of Administrative Record

On July 8, 2014, Plaintiff filed an application for Disability Insurance Benefits (DIB) alleging a disability onset date of April 13, 2012 (Tr. 15). After Plaintiff's claims were denied initially and upon reconsideration, she requested a hearing *de novo* before an Administrative Law Judge ("ALJ"). On November 1, 2016, ALJ Elizabeth Motta held an video hearing at which Plaintiff appeared with counsel. The ALJ heard testimony from Plaintiff and an impartial vocational expert. On May 3, 2017, the ALJ denied Plaintiff's

application in a written decision. (Tr. 15-30). Plaintiff now seeks judicial review of the denial of her application for benefits.¹

Plaintiff was born in 1981 and was 35 years old at the time the ALJ issued her written decision. She graduated from high school and has past relevant work as a nurse. She alleges disability based primarily on her mental impairments.

Based upon the record and testimony presented at the hearing, the ALJ found that Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: mild degenerative disc disease, obesity, right carpal tunnel syndrome, bipolar disorder, anxiety disorder, and borderline personality . (Tr. 17). The ALJ concluded that none of Plaintiff's impairments alone or in combination met or medically equaled a listed impairment in 20 C.F.R. Part 404, Subp. P, Appendix 1. The ALJ determined that Plaintiff retains the following residual functional capacity ("RFC") to perform light work with the following limitations:

She can lift/carry 20 pounds occasionally and 10 pounds frequently; sit, stand and walk each up to 6 hours in an 8-hour workday; an opportunity to alternate positions for 15 minutes per hour (without being off task); occasionally perform postural activities such as climb stairs and ramps, balance, stoop, kneel, crouch and crawl; no climbing of ladders, ropes and scaffolds; no exposure to hazards such as dangerous machinery or unprotected heights; frequently handle and finger bilaterally; simple, repetitive tasks; low stress work with no strict production quotas or fast pace and only routine work with few changes in the work setting, no contact with the public as part of the job duties; and only occasional contact with coworkers and supervisors, including no teamwork or over the shoulder supervision.

¹ Plaintiff filed a prior application for benefits that was denied in a prior decision on April 12, 2012. ALJ Motta found that there was new and material evidence to support a new residual functional capacity. The ALJ further determined that there is no change in the finding that Plaintiff cannot return to past relevant work. As such, ALJ Motta concluded that the requirements of the *Drummond* Ruling have been met. See *Drummond v. Commissioner*, 126 F.3d 837 (6th Cir. 1997) and AR-98-4/61.

(Tr. 20). Based upon the record as a whole including testimony from the vocational expert, and given Plaintiff's age, education, work experience, and RFC, the ALJ concluded that Plaintiff is unable to perform her past relevant work. Nonetheless, there are jobs that exist in significant numbers in the national economy that she can perform, including such jobs as inspector, sorter, routing clerk and document preparer. Accordingly, the ALJ determined that Plaintiff is not under disability, as defined in the Social Security Regulations, and is not entitled to DIB. *Id.*

The Appeals Council denied Plaintiff's request for review. Therefore, the ALJ's decision stands as the Defendant's final determination. On appeal to this Court, Plaintiff argues that the ALJ erred by: 1) improperly weighting the psychological medical opinions; 2) improperly assessing her credibility, pain and subjective complaints; and 3) committing various vocational errors. Upon close analysis, I find Plaintiff's first assignment of error to be well taken and dispositive. As such, this matter should be remanded for further fact finding.

II. Analysis

A. Judicial Standard of Review

To be eligible for SSI or DIB a claimant must be under a "disability" within the definition of the Social Security Act. See 42 U.S.C. §§423(a), (d), 1382c(a). The definition of the term "disability" is essentially the same for both DIB and SSI. See *Bowen v. City of New York*, 476 U.S. 467, 469-70 (1986). Narrowed to its statutory meaning, a "disability" includes only physical or mental impairments that are both "medically determinable" and severe enough to prevent the applicant from (1) performing his or her

past job and (2) engaging in “substantial gainful activity” that is available in the regional or national economies. See *Bowen*, 476 U.S. at 469-70 (1986).

When a court is asked to review the Commissioner’s denial of benefits, the court’s first inquiry is to determine whether the ALJ’s non-disability finding is supported by substantial evidence. 42 U.S.C. § 405(g). Substantial evidence is “such relevant evidence as a reasonable mind might accept as adequate to support a conclusion.” *Richardson v. Perales*, 402 U.S. 389, 401 (1971) (additional citation and internal quotation omitted). In conducting this review, the court should consider the record as a whole. *Hephner v. Mathews*, 574 F.2d 359, 362 (6th Cir. 1978). If substantial evidence supports the ALJ’s denial of benefits, then that finding must be affirmed, even if substantial evidence also exists in the record to support a finding of disability. *Felisky v. Bowen*, 35 F.3d 1027, 1035 (6th Cir. 1994). As the Sixth Circuit has explained:

The Secretary’s findings are not subject to reversal merely because substantial evidence exists in the record to support a different conclusion The substantial evidence standard presupposes that there is a ‘zone of choice’ within which the Secretary may proceed without interference from the courts. If the Secretary’s decision is supported by substantial evidence, a reviewing court must affirm.

Id. (citations omitted).

In considering an application for disability benefits, the Social Security Agency is guided by the following sequential benefits analysis: at Step 1, the Commissioner asks if the claimant is still performing substantial gainful activity; at Step 2, the Commissioner determines if one or more of the claimant’s impairments are “severe;” at Step 3, the Commissioner analyzes whether the claimant’s impairments, singly or in combination, meet or equal a Listing in the Listing of Impairments; at Step 4, the Commissioner determines whether or not the claimant can still perform his or her past relevant work;

and finally, at Step 5, if it is established that claimant can no longer perform his or her past relevant work, the burden of proof shifts to the agency to determine whether a significant number of other jobs which the claimant can perform exist in the national economy. See *Combs v. Commissioner of Soc. Sec.*, 459 F.3d 640, 643 (6th Cir. 2006); 20 C.F.R. §§404.1520, 416.920.

A plaintiff bears the ultimate burden to prove by sufficient evidence that he or she is entitled to disability benefits. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1512(a). Thus, a plaintiff seeking benefits must present sufficient evidence to show that, during the relevant time period, he or she suffered impairment, or combination of impairments, expected to last at least twelve months, that left him or her unable to perform any job in the national economy. 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A).

B. The ALJ's Decision is not substantially supported

Plaintiff argues first that the ALJ erred in failing to give controlling weight to the findings of her treating psychologist, Dr. Alice Onady. Plaintiff also argues that the ALJ erred by inconsistently assigning “great weight” to the State agency physicians. The undersigned agrees.

In evaluating the opinion evidence, the ALJ must consider the factors set forth in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(d)(2). These factors include: “(1) the length of the treatment relationship and the frequency of the examination; (2) the nature and extent of the treatment relationship; (3) the supportability of the opinion, with respect to relevant evidence such as medical signs and laboratory findings; (4) the consistency of the opinion with the record as a whole; (5) the specialization of the physician rendering the opinion;

and (6) any other factor raised by the applicant.” *Meece v. Barnhart*, 192 Fed. Appx. 456, 461 (6th Cir.2006) (citing 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1527(d)(2)-(d)(6)).

It is well established that the “[t]he ALJ ‘must’ give a treating source opinion controlling weight if the treating source opinion is ‘well-supported by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques’ and is ‘not inconsistent with the other substantial evidence in [the] case record.’” *Blakley v. Commissioner Of Social Sec.*, 581 F.3d 399, 406 (6th Cir.2009) (quoting *Wilson v. Commissioner*, 378 F.3d 541, 544 (6th Cir.2004)). A finding by the ALJ that a treating physician’s opinion is not consistent with the other substantial evidence in the case record “means only that the opinion is not entitled to ‘controlling weight,’ *not that the opinion should be rejected.*” Soc. Sec. Rul. 96–2p, 1996 WL 374188, at *4 (emphasis added). “Treating source medical opinions are still entitled to deference and must be weighed using all of the factors provided in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527 and 416.927.” *Blakley*, 581 F.3d at 408. These factors include the length, nature and extent of the treatment relationship and the frequency of examination. 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(d)(2)(i)(ii); 416 .927(d)(2)(i)(ii); *Wilson*, 378 F.3d at 544. In addition, the ALJ must consider the medical specialty of the source, how well-supported by evidence the opinion is, how consistent the opinion is with the record as a whole, and other factors which tend to support or contradict the opinion. 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1527(d)(3)-(6), 416.927(d)(3)-(6); *Wilson v. Commissioner*, 378 F.3d 541, 544 (6th Cir.2004).

The ALJ must satisfy the clear procedural requirement of giving “good reasons” for the weight accorded to a treating physician’s opinion: “[A] decision denying benefits ‘must contain specific reasons for the weight given to the treating source’s medical opinion, supported by the evidence in the case record, and must be sufficiently specific to make

clear to any subsequent reviewers the weight the adjudicator gave to the treating source's medical opinion and the reasons for that weight. Social Security Ruling 96-2p, 1996 WL 374188, at *5 (1996)." *Wilson*, 378 F.3d at 544. The specific reasons requirement exists not only to enable claimants to understand the disposition of their cases, but to ensure "that the ALJ applies the treating physician rule and permit[] meaningful review of the ALJ's application of the rule." *Id.* Only where a treating doctor's opinion "is so patently deficient that the Commissioner could not possibly credit it" will the ALJ's failure to observe the requirements for assessing weight to a treating physician not warrant a reversal. *Id.* at 547.

Moreover, in evaluating the opinion evidence the ALJ must consider the factors set forth in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(d)(2). These factors include: "(1) the length of the treatment relationship and the frequency of the examination; (2) the nature and extent of the treatment relationship; (3) the supportability of the opinion, with respect to relevant evidence such as medical signs and laboratory findings; (4) the consistency of the opinion with the record as a whole; (5) the specialization of the physician rendering the opinion; and (6) any other factor raised by the applicant." *Meece v. Barnhart*, 192 Fed. Appx. 456, 461 (6th Cir. 2006) (citing 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1527(d)(2)-(d)(6)).

Here, in formulating Plaintiff's mental RFC, the ALJ gave some weight to the findings of Dr. Onady to the extent of Plaintiff's need for some restriction, but the ALJ gave "no controlling or deferential weight" to her findings." (Tr. 26). In support of this finding, the ALJ noted that Dr. Onady findings were not supported by objective mental status exams and appeared to based on Plaintiff's subjective complaints. (Tr. 26-27). The ALJ further noted that Plaintiff's mental health records demonstrated that Plaintiff's

visits focused mostly on case management rather than on pharmaceutical management or individual therapy. (Tr. 27 citing Tr. 750-778, 1019-79, 1128-53). The ALJ's findings with respect to Dr. Onady, at least in part, fail to comport with Agency regulations and controlling law.

As noted above, the ALJ rejected the findings of Dr. Onady, in part, because her opinions were based upon Plaintiff's reports of her symptoms. However, contrary to the findings of the ALJ, the fact that those opinions were based on Plaintiff's self-reports does not provide an adequate basis to reject such findings. Notably, the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals, citing *Poulin v. Bowen*, 817 F.2d 865 (D.C.Cir.1987), stated that:

A psychiatric impairment is not as readily amenable to substantiation by objective laboratory testing as a medical impairment ... consequently, the diagnostic techniques employed in the field of psychiatry may be somewhat less tangible than those in the field of medicine.... In general, mental disorders cannot be ascertained and verified as are most physical illnesses, for the mind cannot be probed by mechanical devices [sic] in order to obtain objective clinical manifestations of medical illness.... When mental illness is the basis of a disability claim, clinical and laboratory data may consist of the diagnosis and observations of professionals trained in the field of psychopathology. The report of a psychiatrist should not be rejected simply because of the relative imprecision of the psychiatric methodology or the absence of substantial documentation, unless there are other reasons to question the diagnostic techniques.

Blankenship v. Bowen, 874 F.2d 1116, 1121, (6th Cir.1989).

In *Blankenship*, the Sixth Circuit concluded that no cause existed to question the diagnosis of a psychiatrist made after only one interview and where no psychological testing had been conducted and even though the doctor noted the need for a more accurate history. *Blankenship*, 874 F.2d at 1121. Thus, interviews are clearly an acceptable diagnostic technique in the area of mental impairments and Dr. Onady could rely upon Plaintiff's subjective complaints elicited during her treatment sessions in

formulating Plaintiff's functional restrictions. See *Warford v. Astrue*, No. 09-52, WL 3190756, at *6 (E.D.Ky. Aug. 11, 2010) (finding interviews are an acceptable diagnostic technique in the area of mental impairments).

As noted above, the Commissioner is required to provide "good reasons" for discounting the weight given to a treating-source opinion. Id. § 404.1527(c)(2). These reasons must be "supported by the evidence in the case record, and must be sufficiently specific to make clear to any subsequent reviewers the weight the adjudicator gave to the treating source's medical opinion and the reasons for that weight." Soc. Sec. Rul. No. 96-2p, 1996 WL 374188, at *5 (Soc. Sec. Admin. July 2, 1996). This procedural requirement "ensures that the ALJ applies the treating physician rule and permits meaningful review of the ALJ's application of the rule." *Wilson v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 378 F.3d 541, 544 (6th Cir.2004).

Furthermore, the ALJ also pointed to mental health records demonstrating that Plaintiff's visits focused mostly on case management rather than on pharmaceutical management or individual therapy (Tr. 27 citing Tr. 750-778, 1019-79, 1128-53). While this may correct, the records contain objective evidence² and clinical findings relating to Plaintiff's mental impairments from Dr. Onady. As noted by Plaintiff, these include clinical

² Objective medical evidence consists of medical signs and laboratory findings as defined in 20 C.F.R. § 404.1528(b) and (c). See 20 C.F.R. § 404.1512(b)(1). "Signs" are defined as "anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities which can be observed, apart from your statements (symptoms). Signs must be shown by medically acceptable clinical diagnostic techniques. Psychiatric signs are medically demonstrable phenomena that indicate specific psychological abnormalities, e.g., abnormalities of behavior, mood, thought, memory, orientation, development, or perception. They must also be shown by observable facts that can be medically described and evaluated." 20 C.F.R. § 404.1528(b).

findings such as anxiety, isolation, mood disturbances, paranoia and suspicion. (Tr. 621, 625, 360,-32, 646, 653, 656, 660, 369, 767, 773, 1064, 1121, 1190).

Moreover, the ALJ's sparse analysis related to the weight assigned to the state agency psychologist prevents the Court from engaging in meaningful review of her findings. Notably, the ALJ assigned great weight to the opinions of the state agency psychologists Drs. Bruce Goldsmith and Todd Finnerty, both of whom found that Plaintiff's mental impairments limited her to work involving 3-4 step tasks in a low stress environment, which involves occasionally contact with supervisors and coworkers, no contact with the general public, no fast paced work or production quotas. (Tr. 28). In so concluding, the ALJ's decision states, *in toto*: "I give great weight to the opinion of these reviewers but I have added more detail to the low stress restriction and a restriction against teamwork or over the shoulder supervision." (Tr. 28). Notably, the ALJ fails to explain why he assigned great weight to their findings.

As a rule, the ALJ must build an accurate and logical bridge between the evidence and his conclusion. *Fleischer v. Astrue*, 774 F.Supp.2d 875, 877 (N.D.Ohio 2011); see also *Wilson v. Comm. of Soc. Sec.*, 378 F.3d 541, 544–546 (6th Cir.2004) (finding it was not harmless error for the ALJ to fail to make sufficiently clear why he rejected the treating physician's opinion, even if substantial evidence not mentioned by the ALJ may have existed to support the ultimate decision to reject the treating physician's opinion). Thus, "an ALJ's decision must articulate with specificity reasons for the findings and conclusions that he or she makes." *Bailey v. Commissioner of Social Security*, 173 F.3d 428, 1999 WL 96920 at *4 (6th Cir. Feb, 2, 1999). See also *Hurst v. Secretary of Health and Human Services*, 753 F.2d 517 (6th Cir.1985) (articulation of reasons for disability decision

essential to meaningful appellate review); Social Security Ruling (SSR) 82-62 at *4 (the “rationale for a disability decision must be written so that a clear picture of the case can be obtained”). Here, the ALJ’s evaluation of the opinion evidence does not build an accurate and logical bridge between the evidence and his conclusion.

Furthermore, it is clearly established law that the opinion of a non-treating “one-shot” consultative physician or of a medical advisor cannot constitute substantial evidence to overcome the properly supported opinion of a physician who has treated a claimant over a period of years. See *Lashley v. Secretary of Health and Human Services*, 708 F.2d 1048, 1054 (6th Cir.1983). As detailed above, Dr. Onady, treated Plaintiff since 2011 and her findings were properly supported.

It appears that the ALJ applied a more rigorous scrutiny to Dr. Onady’s opinions than to those of the nontreating and nonexamining opinions. The Sixth Circuit has found that this is precisely the inverse of the analysis that the regulation requires. *Gayheart v. Comm'r of Soc. Sec.*, 710 F.3d 365, 379 (6th Cir.2013), reh'g denied (May 2, 2013). See also 20 C.F.R. § 404.1527(c); Soc. Sec. Rul. No. 96-6p, 1996 WL 374180, at *2 (Soc. Sec. Admin. July 2, 1996). As such, the ALJ’s decision indicates that his assessment of psychological opinions evidence failed to abide by the Commissioner’s regulations and therefore calls into question the ALJ’s analysis. See *Cole v. Astrue*, 661 F.3d 931, 937 (6th Cir.2011) (“An ALJ’s failure to follow agency rules and regulations denotes a lack of substantial evidence.” (internal quotation marks omitted)). Accordingly, this matter should be remanded because there is insufficient evidence in the record to support the Commissioner’s conclusions. On remand, the ALJ should be instructed to properly

evaluate and weigh the opinion evidence in accordance with Agency regulations and controlling law.

III. Conclusion and Recommendation

This matter should be remanded pursuant to Sentence Four of § 405(g) for further proceedings consistent with this Report and Recommendation. A sentence four remand under 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) provides the required relief in cases where there is insufficient evidence in the record to support the Commissioner's conclusions and further fact-finding is necessary. See *Faucher v. Secretary of Health and Human Servs.*, 17 F.3d 171, 174 (6th Cir.1994) (citations omitted). In a sentence four remand, the Court makes a final judgment on the Commissioner's decision and "may order the Secretary to consider additional evidence on remand to remedy a defect in the original proceedings, a defect which caused the Secretary's misapplication of the regulations in the first place." *Faucher*, 17 F.3d at 175. All essential factual issues have not been resolved in this matter, nor does the current record adequately establish Plaintiff's entitlement to benefits as of her alleged onset date. *Faucher*, 17 F.3d at 176.

For the reasons explained herein, **IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT:**

1. The decision of the Commissioner to deny Plaintiff DIB benefits be **REVERSED** and this matter be **REMANDED** under sentence four of 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) consistent with this Report and Recommendation;
2. As no further matters remain pending for the Court's review, this case be **CLOSED**.

s/Stephanie K. Bowman
Stephanie K. Bowman

United States Magistrate Judge

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NOTICE

Pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. P. 72(b), any party may serve and file specific, written objections to this Report & Recommendation (“R&R”) within **FOURTEEN (14) DAYS** of the filing date of this R&R. That period may be extended further by the Court on timely motion by either side for an extension of time. All objections shall specify the portion(s) of the R&R objected to, and shall be accompanied by a memorandum of law in support of the objections. A party shall respond to an opponent’s objections within **FOURTEEN (14) DAYS** after being served with a copy of those objections. Failure to make objections in accordance with this procedure may forfeit rights on appeal. See *Thomas v. Arn*, 474 U.S. 140 (1985); *United States v. Walters*, 638 F.2d 947 (6th Cir. 1981).